

Praises of the Buddha beyond Praise*

The recollection of the Buddha according to the *iti pi so* formula is an ancient practice, recommended by the Sakyan Sage himself in the *Dhajagga-sutta* (*Sagāthavagga*, *Samyutta-nikāya*). The formula lists nine qualities of the Buddha, which came to be known as the *nava-buddha-guṇa*. It was recognized early on, however, that the qualities or virtues of the Buddha were without limit. The idea that the Buddha is beyond praise (*aparimāṇavaṇṇo*) is expressed in a stock passage uttered by several leading brāhmaṇas of the time, such as Soṇadaṇḍa, Kūṭadanta, and Caṅkī, each of whom is reported to declare:¹ “I have mastered only so many of the praises of the respected Gotama, but this is not the full measure of his praises: the respected Gotama merits unlimited praise”.²

* Unless otherwise noted references are to Pali Text Society (PTS) editions. For the *aṭṭhakathā* I also refer to Burmese script Chaṭṭhasaṅgīti (ChS) editions, and to Thai script editions published by the Mahāmakūṭarājavidyālaya (Mm) and the Bhūmibalo Foundation (BhB).

¹ DN I 117.14 *ettake kho ahaṃ bho tassa bhoṭo gotamassa vanne pariyāpunāmi, no ca kho so bhavaṃ gotamo ettakavaṇṇo, aparimāṇavaṇṇo hi so bhavaṃ gotamo*: also at DN I 133.23 (*Kūṭadanta-sutta*) and MN II 168.3 (*Caṅkī-sutta*). There does not seem to be any parallel passage in the Chinese version of the *Soṇadaṇḍa-sutta*: see Konrad Meisig, “Chung Têh King—The Chinese Parallel to the Soṇadaṇḍa-Sutta”, in V.N. Jha (ed.), *Kalyāṇa-mitta: Professor Hajime Nakamura Felicitation Volume*, Delhi, 1991, p. 55.

² “And so far only do I know the excellencies of the Samaṇa Gotama, but these are not all of them, for his excellence is beyond measure”: T.W. Rhys Davids, *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Vol. I, [1899] London 1973, p. 150; “However much I might praise the ascetic Gotama, that praise is insufficient, he is beyond all praise”: Maurice Walshe, *Thus Have I Heard: The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, London, 1987, p. 128; “To this extent I, sirs, know the good Gotama’s splendour, but this is not the (full) extent of the good Gotama’s splendour—immeasurable is the splendour of the good Gotama”: I.B. Horner, *The Collection of the Middle Length Sayings (Majjhima-nikāya)*, Vol. II, London, [1957] 1975, p. 358; “This much is the praise of Master Gotama that I have learned, but the praise of Master Gotama is not limited to that, for the praise of Master Gotama is

Continues...

This natural statement, which culminates a long eulogy of the Buddha, was later rephrased as a general principle: “The Buddhas, the Blessed Ones, merit unlimited praise”.³ In the *Apadāna*, Gatasaññaka Thera refers to the Buddha Tissa as “an ocean of unlimited virtues” (*anantagūṇasāgara*).⁴ What had started out as a rather straightforward fact took on a mystical flavour.

The following passage shows how this concept was presented in Siam at the beginning of the 19th century. It is taken from the *Traibhūmilokavinicchayakathā*, also known as the *Traibhūmi chabap luang*, which was composed at the behest of Rāma I, the first king of the Chakri Dynasty, by Phraya Dharmapriyā (Kaew) in Culasakkarāja 1164 or BE 2345, that is CE 1802.⁵ The citation is from the beginning of the first chapter (*paṭhamapariccheda*), on homage to the Three Gems (*kham namaskār phra ratanatray*). The prose is in Thai, the verses in Pāli.⁶

immeasurable’: Bhikkhu Nānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Kandy, 1995, p. 778.

³ *Udāna-aṭṭhakathā* (Mm) 524.1 *aparimāṇavaṇṇā hi buddhā bhagavanto*.

⁴ *Apadāna* (Nālandā ed.) I 151 (PTS p. 127).

⁵ Fine Arts Department (ed.), Phraya Dharmapriyā (Kaew), *Traibhūmilokavinicchayakathā chabap ti 2 (Traibhūmi chabap luang)*, Bangkok, 2520 [1977], Vol. 1, pp. 15–16. For a brief note on the textual history of the *Traibhūmi* genre, see Peter A. Jackson, “Re-interpreting the Traiphuum Phra Ruang: Political Functions of Buddhist Symbolism in Contemporary Thailand”, in Trevor Ling (ed.), *Buddhist Trends in Southeast Asia*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1993, pp. 69–70. For Phraya Dharmapriyā see H.H. Prince Dhani Nivat, “The Reconstruction of Rāma I of the Chakri Dynasty”, in *Collected Articles by H.H. Prince Dhani Nivat reprinted from the Journal of the Siam Society*, Bangkok, 1969, p. 159 (originally published in *Journal of the Siam Society* XLIII-1, 1955).

⁶ I give in parentheses selected phrases that derive from Pāli or Sanskrit, in their Thai orthography. *phra* (rendered here as “holy”), *chao* (rendered here as “lord”), and *somdet* (not translated) are frequently attached to the names or titles of objects or persons of respect in Thai.

The Holy (*phra*) Buddhagūṇa (virtues or qualities of the Buddha) are endless (*ananta*), vast (*vitthāra*), and wide, and their limit cannot be reached: it is beyond the ability of all of the deities, such as Indra or Brahma, to enumerate (*barrṇanā*) the Holy Buddhagūṇa to the limit or to the end. It is the same even for the Holy Omniscient Lord Buddha (*Phra Sabbaññūbuddha Chao*): he can enumerate his own holy qualities, but even he is unable to enumerate them to the limit and to the end. Though he may continue to enumerate them, his life-span (*phra janmāyu*) will be exhausted before [he can finish]: it is impossible to know the end or know the limit of the Holy Buddhagūṇa. The matter is suitably explained by these verses:

*sahassasīso⁷ pi ce poso sīse sīse satam mukhā
mukhe mukhe satam jivhā jivakappo mahiddhiko
na sakkoti ca vaṇṇetum⁸ nisesam satthuno gūṇam.*

Even if a person had a thousand heads—
each head with a hundred mouths,
each mouth with a hundred tongues—
and even if he could live for an aeon
and possessed great supernormal power:
he would still be unable to enumerate
the virtues of the Teacher in full.

*buddho pi buddhassa bhaṇeyya vaṇṇam
kappam pi ce añṇam abhāsamāno*

⁷ *-sīse Traibhūmi*: I follow here the Khmer citation (see below), to read *-sīso*.

⁸ *vaṇṇetu Traibhūmi*: I follow here the Khmer citation, to read *vaṇṇetum*.

*khīyetha kappo ciradīgham⁹ antare
vaṇṇo na khīyetha tathāgatassa.*

If a Buddha were to speak in praise of a Buddha,
speaking nothing else for an aeon's length,
sooner would the long-standing aeon reach its end,
but the praise of the Tathāgata would not reach its
end.¹⁰

The first verse may be explained as follows: a man possessing great supernormal power (*mahiddhi-rddhi*) conjures up (*nrmit*) a multitude of heads, 1000 in number. Each of these heads has 100 mouths, and each of these mouths has 100 tongues—this amounts to 100,000 mouths and to 10 million tongues. The man has a long life-span, as long as one aeon (*kappa*). If he does not engage in any other activity at all, but devotes himself only to the praise of the Holy Buddhagaṇa, throughout the day and throughout the night, until his aeon-long life-span is exhausted—he would nonetheless be unable to enumerate the Holy Buddhagaṇa to the end or to the limit.

The second verse may be explained thus: Somdet the Holy Omniscient Lord Buddha has a long life-span of an aeon; if he does not preach on any other subject at all, but, as in the

⁹ *Traibhūmi* only reads *cīra-*, against the *cira-* of the *aṭṭhakathā* (see below).

¹⁰ I take the translation from Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Discourse on the All-embracing Net of Views: The Brahmajāla Sutta and its Commentarial Exegesis*, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, 1978, p. 330; cf. also translations in Peter Masefield, *The Udāna Commentary (Paramatthadīpanī nāma Udānaṭṭhakathā)*, Vol. II, Oxford, 1995, p. 871; and in I.B. Horner, *The Clarifier of the Sweet Meaning (Madhurattavilāsini)*, London, 1978, pp. 193–94. Horner did not understand the verse.

previous example, preaches only on the Holy Buddhagaṇa of Somdet the Holy Omniscient Lord Buddha, throughout the day and throughout the night, and continues preaching until the end of that long stretch of time, to the limit of his aeon-long life-span—the Holy Buddhagaṇa of Somdet the Holy Tathāgata the Ten-powered one (Daśabala) would not yet be exhausted.

I have not been able to trace the origin of the first verse, which is also cited in Pāli in a Khmer “Itipiso” text.¹¹ The second verse, however, is well attested in the commentarial literature, being cited without specific attribution in (at least) the following sources:¹²

—*Dīgha Aṭṭhakathā*, commenting on the *Soṇadaṇḍa-sutta* (DN 4);¹³

—*Dīgha Aṭṭhakathā*, commenting on the *Sampasādaniya-sutta* (DN 28);¹⁴

—*Majjhima Aṭṭhakathā*, commenting on the *Caṅkī-sutta* (MN 95);¹⁵

—*Udāna Aṭṭhakathā*, commenting on the third sutta of the *Jaccandha-vagga*;¹⁶

—*Cariyāpiṭaka Aṭṭhakathā* (twice);¹⁷

¹¹ F. Bizot and O. von Hinüber, *La guirlande de Joyaux* (Textes bouddhiques du Cambodge 2), Paris, 1994, (text) 135, (translation) 180–81.

¹² I have culled the references from the notes to the *Chaṭṭhasaṅgīti* editions. The verse is usually introduced by *vuttaṃ h' etaṃ* (*vuttaṃ pi c' etaṃ*, *vuttaṃ c' etaṃ*, etc.).

¹³ (PTS) 288 (not seen); (ChS) [I] 257.8; (Mm) I 356.8; (Nālandā ed.) 315.25 (cf. comment in *ṭīkā*, ChS [I] 318.7–10).

¹⁴ (Mm) III 80.8; (ChS) [III] 61 (not seen).

¹⁵ (Mm) III 388.16; (ChS) III 209 (not seen).

¹⁶ (ChS) 305, bottom; (Mm) 426.4. A similar statement is made in prose at (Mm) 542.1–4.

¹⁷ (ChS) 9.1; 324.12; (BhB) 13.8; 506.7.

—*Apadāna Aṭṭhakathā*,¹⁸

—*Buddhavaṃsa Aṭṭhakathā*,¹⁹

—*Dīghanikāya-ṭīkā (Līnatthappakāsanā)*.²⁰

The references show that the verse was well-known by 5th century, the time of Buddhaghosa, as well as to the commentators Dhammapāla and Buddhadatta.²¹

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¹⁸ (ChS) II 91.17.

¹⁹ (PTS) 135.9; (BhB) 250.1; (ChS) 163 (not seen).

²⁰ *Sīlakkhandhavagga-ṭīkā* (ChS) 51.1.

²¹ The idea of talking for an aeon or more is found in the *Vimalakīrti-sūtra*: Étienne Lamotte, *L'Enseignement de Vimalakīrti (Vimalakīrtinirdeśa)*, Louvain, 1962, pp. 257–58. Lamotte (n. 17) refers to a similar hyperbole in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā*.